

GRANNY ED AND THE LEWISVILLE RAIDERS

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It never occurred to me that Granny Ed was different from other grandmothers. Her name was out of the ordinary, but she always said, "If your parents put a handle like Edwinalou on you, you'd prefer a nickname too." It made good sense to me. She had normal grandmother interests like knitting, baking, and attending my basketball games.

Basketball! I eat and sleep the sport, but right then I wished I'd never heard of it. Our high school team had basketball Trouble, and I mean Trouble with a capital T.

Coach Marshall was a super coach, and we had high hopes of finishing first in the district this year. What happened? December second, Coach Marshall had a car accident over by Murphy Junction. He ended up in the hospital with a broken back and will be in the hospital two months—plus a long convalescence. To make matters worse, the only other man teacher in our high school is Mr. LaFrance, who doesn't know whether you bounce, kick, or bury a basketball. That leaves the Lewisville Raiders coachless.

The team had gathered at our house, as usual, due to Granny Ed's weakness for feeding hungry ballplayers.

"Men, we've got troubles if the principal can't come up with someone to take Coach Marshall's place," Al James said, between huge bites of pizza.

"Wish my dad could help out, but he's working swing shift at the sawmill," said Leftie.

"If Grandpa Thor were still living, he would take over," I added sadly. "He was a great college coach before he died." The team nodded in sympathetic agreement and respect.

"If we could just get someone to come to the gym and supervise our practices, maybe we could stumble along until a replacement for Coach Marshall is found," Al said.

"That's easier said than done. All the teachers are already doubling up on classes," I said, feeling more discouraged every minute.

"Well, gentlemen, if a body is all you need at practice, I can certainly provide that," Granny Ed spoke from the doorway. "You're sure not going to let a little problem like this throw a monkey wrench in the Lewisville Raider team, are you?"

There was a long silence. I wanted to sink through the floor. Granny Ed at practice! Oh no! You've really done it this time, Granny Ed, I thought.

Al, who has a reputation for having a pretty cool head, was the first to speak. "You know, Granny Ed, I think if the principal OK's your offer, it would really help us out of a tough spot. We need help right now!"

The rest of the team nodded in approval.

That's how it all started. Granny Ed arrived promptly at three-thirty the next afternoon. Her knitting bag was under one arm, a newspaper under the other, and she was sporting the brightest pair of red tennis shoes I'd ever laid eyes on.

"Go right ahead with your practice, gentlemen. I'll just sit here and watch," she said, whipping out her spare knitting needle that was always secured in the thick braids on top of her head.

"OK, men, let's work on some man-to-man defense," Al yelled. "We've been pretty sloppy."

Buzzie and Leftie brought the ball down court. Mark Elingson was guarding Leftie, but with one quick move Leftie faked out Mark and went in for an easy shot.

"Run the play again," Al called out, "and this time, stay with your man, Mark."

Buzzie tossed the ball to Leftie. A quick move to his left and Leftie had another easy shot.

"What do you do with a left-handed shooter, Mark?" a voice shouted from the sidelines. Granny Ed leaped to her feet and was out on the floor, showing Mark exactly what he was doing wrong.

"You're positioning your body wrong for a left-handed shooter," she said. "And you, Al, you've been standing in the key at least ten seconds. Move in and out of there. In a game the referee would give the ball out-of-bounds to the other team," she scolded.

Al's face turned tomato-red, but he nodded in agreement. "Guess you're right, Granny Ed, but how do you know about basketball rules?"

"Gentlemen, I didn't sit for twenty-five years keeping statistics and watching Big Thor coach for nothing. There is very little I don't know about basketball."

From then on, it was Granny Ed all the way. She worked us so hard and long our tongues were hanging out, but we all knew it was the best practice session we'd had all season.

"See you tomorrow, Granny Ed," the team yelled as we headed out the gym doors for home.

"Goodbye, gentlemen." Granny Ed waved back happily.

She hummed to herself as we headed toward home. Suddenly she stopped. "I didn't embarrass you, did I, Sprout?" she asked anxiously. "Did I come on a little too strong at practice?" She studied my face carefully.

"No, Granny, you did just fine," I said, trying to sound convincing. "You really helped us out." What could it hurt? It would only be for a few days.

They say bad luck runs in streaks, but for our Lewisville Raiders it ran as wide as the Colorado River. At the end of the week, there was no new basketball coach.

"It is a financial impossibility for our small district to pay the salary of another teacher-coach, boys. Until the school board finds a volunteer to take over, you will simply have to make do," Mr. Fisch told us. "It is something over which I have no control," he said, shuffling the papers on his desk nervously.

That day, after practice, we gathered in the gym to discuss our problem.

"Granny Ed, what are we going to do?" Al asked.

"Tomorrow night, gentlemen, you have your first league game against Darby. They're the defending champions in the league, but I believe you have the ability to beat them. You've worked long and hard in practice, and you're ready for any team. If you're willing to put up with an old lady for one game, I'll do my very best to help. What do you say, gentlemen?"

The startled players looked from one to another. I stared a hole through the gym floor. I just couldn't bear to watch what was going to happen. Whispers passed from player to player, and then Al stood up.

"Granny Ed, we figure you've helped us in a tough situation. If you really mean it, we would be glad to have you coach the Raiders tomorrow night."

Granny Ed's face broke into a smile bright enough to light up all the western states. "Gentlemen," she said, in a choked voice, "you're going to be the winner."

Darby was three times the size of Lewisville, and their big gym was packed to the rafters as we made our entrance. Last one in the door was Granny Ed, her knitting bag under one arm and chalkboard under the other. She sat down primly on the Lewisville bench, placed her knitting bag beside her, the chalkboard on the floor, and folding her hands in her lap, watched intently every move we were making in warm-ups.

"I'm sorry, madam," the Darby coach said, moving toward Granny Ed. "This bench is reserved for the Lewisville Raiders and their coach. You'll have to move up in the stands with the other spectators."

"Young man, I am perfectly fine right here," Granny Ed said, gently pushing the Darby coach aside to watch our warm-ups.

"Don't you understand what I'm saying? Only the coach can sit here," he repeated loudly.

"Don't shout, young man. I heard you the first time. For your information, I am the coach," Granny Ed said, standing as tall as her five feet would stretch.

"You're what?" the Darby coach gasped. "You said you're what?" he repeated as though his hearing had failed.

"You heard me correctly. Now, if you will kindly move out of my way, I should like very much to watch my team's warm-up."

"This is absolutely unbelievable! I can't put my players out on the floor to play a little old lady's team."

"Well, I shall assume that if your team doesn't show up on the floor when the game whistle blows, you will forfeit the game to the Lewisville Raiders," Granny offered sweetly.

"Forfeit!" the Darby coach shouted. "We'll forfeit nothing. Just remember, Coach Whateveryournameis, you'll be treated the same as any other coach, even if you are a woman." He stamped back and plopped himself down on the far end of the Darby bench.

"Hothead, isn't he?" Granny Ed said with a twinkle in her eye. I knew right then Granny Ed had psyched out our first opponent.

Our fast break was super that night, and using a two-platoon system,

Granny Ed directed a complete rout of the Darby Bulldogs. When the game ended, the scoreboard read: Lewisville-85; Darby-55. It was the upset of the year, and one the people in Lewisville are still talking about.

At the end of the game, Granny Ed gathered up her knitting bag and her chalkboard. She walked quickly to the Darby coach for the traditional handshake and commented ever so sweetly, "The name is not Whateveryournameis, young man. The name is Granny Ed, coach of the Lewisville Raiders."

The Darby coach flinched, turned, and fled to the Darby dressing room. It was the Darby win that launched Granny Ed in her coaching career.

Our Lewisville Raiders, with Granny Ed as head coach, breezed through the fourteen-game league schedule undefeated; and we qualified for the state tournament. Granny Ed had become a celebrity throughout the state. Our phone rang with interview requests and well-wishers. Granny Ed seemed to thrive on all the excitement and was happier than I'd ever seen her.

The state tournament was serious business to Granny Ed, and our practices were no-nonsense and hard work. Next week, our team would travel to the city for our town's first appearance in a state tournament. Then we would find out if the Lewisville Raiders were really good or only a much-publicized curiosity.

The night before we left for the tournament, Granny Ed came into my room and sank down on the bed. Her usual smiling face was drawn and lined. "Sprout, I'm afraid this time I've overstepped my bounds. It was all right to coach against schools in our league, but next week we'll be competing against the big boys. I'm not sure I'm up to it. Maybe it's time for me to step aside."

I folded and refolded the shirt I was packing before I dared look up at her. "Granny Ed, you've taken us this far. Don't you think you owe it to the team to stay with us when the going gets rough?"

"It isn't that I don't want to. I just hope I don't let the team down." Managing a weak smile, she stood up and headed for the door. "Well, with the team behind me, and you behind me, and my picture splashed over half the newspapers in the state, there's just no telling what will happen. Right, Sprout?"

I gave her a big wink. "Granny Ed, nobody ever would have guessed we'd get this far. We'll give it all we've got and every one we win is for you."



"King City, here we come!" Leftie shouted as the chartered bus, decorated from front to back with gaudy red and gold banners, entered the city limits. There was no turning back now. For better or for worse, our team was about to play in its first state tourney. Heaven help us and Granny Ed! I thought. And Grandpa Thor, if you have any pull up there, don't let the other teams pour it on too bad.

Each team in the tournament was given a practice session in the Coliseum before it competed in its first game. The Coliseum was unbelievably big. It seated 10,000, which was about 9,500 more than the Lewisville gym. Granny Ed could tell how nervous we all were.

"Gentlemen," she said, motioning for us to join her at the side of the gym floor. "You will notice that the playing floor is exactly the same size as our floor. The basket is precisely the same height from the floor. And according to my calculations, it should take no more energy to run up and down this floor, and put the ball through the hoop, than it does in our gym. Am I right?"

A resounding "Right!" was her answer.

With a twinkle in her eyes, Granny Ed went on, "Then I can assume, gentlemen, the player who is not able to do this effectively isn't putting out his all, and I shall personally jab that player with my knitting needle where it will do the most good. Right?"

That broke the team up and they shouted an even louder "Right!"

She had psyched the team out of a bad case of jitters. The only thing was . . . how long would it be before our magic bubble burst?

No one was more surprised or happy than Granny Ed and the Raider team when we swept with ease through the first three games on the winning side. By now, the Lewisville Raiders had become the Cinderella team of the tournament, the country bumpkins showing the city boys the finer points of the game. Headlines in the papers praised our team and Granny Ed.

GRANNY ED AND HER RIPPIN' RAIDERS WIN AGAIN met our eyes as we passed the newspaper stand. We headed for the last and final game—our chance for the state championship.

I don't know who kept the town going, or if they closed up completely, because I saw most of the people of Lewisville packed in the stands. The town's oldest resident, Emil Gunder, was waving a sign saying: GIVE IT TO 'EM, GRANNY.

"Look at that old fool," Granny Ed nudged and whispered to me as she spied Old Emil waving his sign; yet I noticed a smile of satisfaction on her face from the show of support.

The buzzer sounded to start the game. Granny Ed slowly looked around the circle of ballplayers.

"Well, gentlemen, this is it! This is the big one we've been waiting to play. It's the whole ball of wax this time." She gave us a big wink and added, "Don't forget, I've got my secret weapon." And she pointed to the knitting needle neatly tucked in her braids.

I won't say the Orolatch team was tall. Let's put it this way. I'm six-feet, three-inches tall, and it strained my neck to look up at the forward I was to guard. The center opposite Al looked like Paul Bunyan's cousin, and I had the feeling that if he landed on Al, we would find only a splat on the floor where Al had once been. Such were the odds when the Lewisville Raiders played the Orolatch Tigers.

The team managed to stay even with Orolatch due to our fantastic shooting percentage during the first half. Leftie proved to be a deadeye, and we trailed by only two points at the end of the third quarter. The noise was terrific, and the tension was thick enough to cut. The fact that fouls were not being called closely added to the chaos. Al looked as though he'd been through a meat grinder. The big Orolatch center had worked him over with his elbows and knees.

I glanced at the bench and noticed Granny Ed was getting kind of purple-red in the face. The last straw was when the Orolatch center, driving to the basket, knocked Al flat, and the referee called the foul on Al who was lying on the floor.

"Basket counts!" the referee yelled, "and a foul on number twenty-three." A flash of red tennis shoes streaked toward the surprised referee. The rest I wish I could forget.

"Sir, and I use that term loosely," Granny Ed shouted, glaring angrily up at the face of the referee, "I brought a team on the floor to play basketball, not to have them dismembered. That asinine call only strengthens my belief that you are blind!" And with that she stripped her wire-framed glasses from her face and handed them to the dumbfounded referee.

There was a dead silence as he stared in disbelief at the small, gray-haired figure marching back to the Lewisville bench. Then it happened!

"Technical foul on the Raider bench!" he shouted, making the dreaded T sign with his hands and pointing straight at Granny Ed.

The big center missed his foul shots, but the Orolatch guard calmly stepped to the line and sank the technical. I looked up at the scoreboard. Two minutes in the game and Orolatch led 75-70. Well, we came close, I thought.

The Orolatch coach called timeout. It was pretty obvious what his strategy would be with only two minutes left.

"They will no doubt go into a stall," Granny Ed said. "Our only chance is to press and press hard. We've got to get possession of that ball!"

Leftie stole the out-of-bounds play and streaked the full length of the court for a lay-in. The crowd erupted with a deafening roar.

This time the Orolatch team passed the ball inbounds and were able to stall for a minute and a half before Al fouled the big center in a frantic try for the ball.

The big center swaggered to the foul line. His shot rolled round and round the rim and off. I timed my jump for the rebound perfectly, and that's the last thing I remember. The big guy had crashed into me. How I held the ball is a miracle, for I was sure my head must be lying somewhere underneath the basket.

"You hurt Sprout?" Granny Ed's voice was anxious as she bent over me on the floor. I shook my head feebly, although I wasn't sure all my body parts were still connected.

"All right then," she whispered in my ear, "you've got a one and one foul shot coming up, and we have no timeouts left. Make the first one and miss the second one. Al will rebound and score a field goal. There are only nine seconds left. Do you understand?"

I nodded weakly. Understand! Understand! Just like that I was to make the first free throw. There was a small matter of my being only a .500 freethrow shooter. Had Granny Ed taken that into consideration? I motioned to Al as I dragged my bruised body to the opposite end of the gym. I whispered Granny Ed's wild game plan to him. He nodded matter-of-factly and stationed himself along the side of the basket.

Shaking my head to clear out the spinning wheels, I stepped to the foul line. "This is crazy," I thought. I see two baskets up there. Now which one shall I aim for? I chose the top one in my half-conscious state and carefully arched the ball upward.

Swish! Down through the net it sailed. The noise of the crowd seemed very far away. Now miss this one. Granny Ed's words cut through the fog in my brain. I aimed the ball for the rim of the basket, and then I did something I've never told anyone—not even Granny Ed. I closed my eyes—tight. I never saw what happened in those last hectic seconds, but I heard a shriek erupt from the Lewisville fans.

"Fouled in the act of shooting!" the referee croaked. Al had rebounded and scored the field goal. He was gently pushing me aside to shoot the one shot that could win the ball game. Pandemonium broke loose. We'd won! The unbelievable had happened! Lewisville had won the State Championship! The team lifted Granny Ed to their shoulders and marched triumphantly out on the floor. She waved happily to the Lewisville rooters. As the players set her down, she grabbed my arm and whispered, "Big Thor should have been here! He always loved the tough ones."

Then a weird thing happened. The lights in that huge Coliseum dimmed, flickered, and came back on.

Granny Ed winked at me and said confidently, "He knows." And do you know something? I'm not so sure he doesn't. ♪

